



Church leaders confront thorny question of whether homosexuality is a sin

by Steve Rabey
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Compassion for homosexuals is one thing; condoning homosexual behavior is another, according to the

Rev. Bob Leivers.

Leivers, pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church, will fly to a denominational meeting in Baltimore on Monday to oppose portions of a national church report that condones homosexual behavior.

The Presbyterian report states that Christians should not condemn "any sexual relations in which there is genuine equality and mutual respect." And Episcopalians, Methodists, and Catholics will debate other controversial sexual issues at their conventions this summer.

As one of three local delegates to the 203rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), which begins Tuesday, Leivers will voice his opposition before the assembly.

Leivers says his opposition is Bible-based. "For us to go against Scripture and give an OK to what God's word has all along said is not acceptable behavior is to turn things all around."

But Leivers isn't a fire-breathing homophobe who wants to burn the authors of the report at the stake.

"This report makes a lot of good points, even though I don't agree with where it's coming from," he says. "For example, it raises some very important questions about sexuality issues for aging Americans. It deals with sexuality issues for the disabled. And it discusses how to restore victims of rape who are in our congregations. These are important issues we need to be talking about."

"But if I'm doing something that Scripture calls wrong, I expect you to tell me I'm wrong — not to turn the Bible around and tell me I'm right."

Leivers will take two locally written overtures — or opposition statements — to Baltimore. But local Presbyterians aren't alone in the opposition to the controversial sexuality report.

"Monday Morning," a bi-weekly publication for Presbyterian pastors and leaders, recently ran an article (titled "The Church that Thought Between its Legs") critical of the report and a list of 44 overtures to the report.

"The Apostle Paul lists all kinds of people in the New Testament who are not going to inherit the kingdom of God," Leivers says, "and that list includes murderers, adulterers, drunkards and homosexuals."

Same book,
different reading

The Rev. Marion Harrison reads the same Bible, but disagrees with Leivers' interpretation. Harrison, who is gay, is pastor of the Pikes Peak Metropolitan Community Church, one of 300 congregations in a fellowship of churches founded by a gay pastor in Los Angeles in 1968.

"It is our theological understanding, based on careful Biblical scholarship, that God does not condemn homosexual people per se, anywhere in the Holy Scriptures," Harrison says.

"The traditional interpretations of Scripture that are used to condemn homosexuality are as incorrect and as invalid as the old interpretations of Scripture which permitted the holding of slaves and the subjugation of black people."

Those who believe homosexuality is a sin often cite 1 Corinthians 6:9-10: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

Harrison says this passage has been mistranslated and misunderstood, and prefers to quote John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." "For me," says Harrison, "that whoever seems to include everyone. We believe that homosexuality is not a sin. Either the gospel call is going to be to all people, or we are going to be exclusive. Most of us believe we are born this way — we were created this way."

Civil rights — or wrongs?

Harrison doesn't restrict himself to the pulpit. An aggressive advocate for gay rights, he publicly supported a proposed Colorado Springs civil rights bill that included gays as a minority group. Gays have since been excluded from the bill, which may be considered by the City Council this month.

"We're not trying to force ourselves on anyone," Harrison says. "We just want the freedom to move about like everyone else."

But Bob Johnson, pastor of Springs of Faith Church of the Nazarene, says gays are "trying to sneak into social acceptance" through civil rights clauses. "The civil rights they're asking for impose on the civil rights of others," says Johnson, who spoke in opposition to the bill in local hearings.

Johnson, who is black, says there's a world of difference between racial issues and sexual-preference issues.

"I did not choose to be black. I was born that way. But from what I see, homosexuality is just a personal preference, a choice," says Johnson.

"There's nothing other than their own choices that put them into the category of homosexuals," says Johnson. "And I believe sin is sin. God discriminates. I still treat gays as people, and I'll help them if I can. If I see a gay person stuck along the highway with a flat tire I'll help him just like any other person. But I'm not going to let them push their homosexuality on our family or our city."

Conservatives
vs. liberals

According to Princeton University sociologist Robert Wuthnow, these debates about human sexuality are just the latest installment in a long-running battle between theological conservatives and liberals.

"These sexual issues are cutting between these groups in much the same way as issues like abortion, peace and military buildups, welfare spending and other conflicts that are already there," says Wuthnow, director of Princeton's Center for the Study of American Religion and author of the book "The Struggle for America's Soul."

"But I think at this point the conservative side is likely to win out. Some observers say we are moving very rapidly in the direction of a second Victorian age. And after the whole AIDS epidemic, people are much more conscious in embracing broad sexual orientations than they were in the early '70s."

"These issues can be looked at from at least three frameworks — the civil liberties framework, the theological framework, and the moral framework. When people approach things from a personal, moral framework, they say, 'Sure, we can extend civil liberties to gays, and sure, God is big enough to love everybody.' But when people ask, 'Do we want to practice this behavior, or do we want our clergy to practice it, or do we want our children to practice it, they are more likely to say 'no.'"

Biology or choice?

According to America's federal courts, civil rights are based on inborn or unchangeable characteristics.

Many homosexuals and social-sciences researchers say homosexuality is a trait in-

herited at birth — not a personal choice. As best-selling Denver-based author and psychologist John Bradshaw writes in "Homecoming," "I want to state strongly that I believe there is growing evidence for homosexuality as an innate tendency, not a pathology or a growth disorder."

But Exodus, a national evangelical ministry to gays based in San Rafael, Calif., quotes famed sex researchers Masters and Johnson, who say, "The genetic theory of homosexuality has been generally discarded today."

Where Grace Abounds is a Denver-based ministry that works with about 70 people struggling with conflicts between their faith and their homosexual lifestyles. Steve Armstrong is an ex-gay who serves as director of counseling for the group, which receives funding from Presbyterian, Baptist and Assemblies of God churches in the Denver area.

"I did grow up with a homosexual orientation," says Armstrong, "but I believe that it is the result of a deficit in intimate relationships with significant members of my own sex, including my father."

"I grew up with a legitimate need for attachment with men, and once I reached puberty, because that need remained unmet, I sexualized that need — which was really a need for emotional intimacy."

Bette is a former lesbian who was molested as a child and began to believe she was gay at age 15.

"After being molested I projected onto men that they are not safe," she says. "I developed a wrong belief that all men want is sex. But as I started to move toward women, I began to perceive

wanted. After having enough of that, I came to a period where I went deep inside of me and said 'there's more to life than this.'"

"What I want now is to be free to love men and women, and to do that as God has intended me to do. I love women more now than I ever did before, but I don't have to express that in a sexual way."

Jim is an ex-gay who leads a weekly support group organized by Where Grace Abounds in Colorado Springs. He says many Christians who are struggling to leave the gay lifestyle suffer an extreme form of isolation.

"It's been very painful for me," says Jim. "I feel like I don't belong anywhere. I feel like if people really knew the truth about me in the gay community or in evangelical circles, that I wouldn't be

